

Dan Lebowitz State House Testimony on Bullying

Good afternoon, I'm Dan Lebowitz, Executive Director of Northeastern University's Sport in Society.

I feel blessed to be here today. I grew up disabled in the city of Hartford. I wore leg braces until age 13. The kind that attached to Buster Brown shoes and screamed that you were different. The experience caused me a lot of pain, but sometimes pain can be a prerequisite for purpose. It can teach us compassion; its endurance breeds empathy; it can cause us to be better people as it forces us to search for a sense of dignity.

I'd like to thank the legislature for acknowledging that bullying wreaks devastation on too many young lives. Because pain alone doesn't lead to success. There were positive role models and experiences along the way that brought me to where I am now. This legislation recognizes that growing and developing our children through a healthy climate of respect is both viable and beneficial to all.

The law focuses on preventing bullying in schools, where children spend a large portion of their day. It even extends its reach to include cyber-bullying. By doing so, the law acknowledges the pervasiveness of bullying and the many areas of life that it affects.

For many of the problems we face as a society, we can recognize what the problems are, but do not have solutions to address them. In the case of bullying, solutions do exist; we must now coordinate our efforts and transform the communities' support into action. At Sport in Society, we use sports to rouse communities struggling with this issue.

Athletics are a vehicle for improved physical, mental, social, and emotional health. Through athletics, young people can develop a multitude of values: teamwork, determination, respect, perseverance, sportsmanship.

For over 25 years, Sport in Society has been utilizing athletes to address issues of bullying and intolerance. Through primary prevention trainings, professional, college and high school athletes are prepared to go out into our communities, and empower young people with the skills to confront and disrupt bullying through innovative educational programming.

I am often asked why we use athletes as trainers. My answer is simple. Athletes in our society are role models. They influence our young people, for better or for worse. By training athletes to be positive voices for social change, we are using their influence for good.

A Lou Harris Study found that children are 70% more likely to listen and remember messages from athletes than non-athletes. This tells us that sports and athletics can be a vehicle for ending bullying in our Commonwealth. With athletes as educators and mentors, we can teach our young people how to confront and disrupt bullying.

At Sport in Society, we work with local youth sports organizations to train their staff, coaches, and athletes in our anti-bullying curriculum. We work with Playworks, the Massachusetts Inter-Scholastic Athletic Association, and other youth sports organizations, to train their student athletes to step up and speak out against bullying in their communities.

However, we need to enlist more student-athletes and coaches in this cause. In Massachusetts, we are fortunate to have a myriad of colleges and universities, each with strong athletic programs. Up to this point we have not in any meaningful way engaged their student-athletes to work in their local towns and cities to combat bullying.

At Northeastern University, where Sport in Society is located, we have been fortunate to work with their athletic department to train coaches and student athletes to work with high school and middle school youth to end bullying. What we have seen from this initiative is an extremely positive and enthusiastic response from after-school sites and the young people that they have worked with.

By taking a bystander approach to education, a 2009 evaluation of Sport in Society's anti-bullying program found that students were better able to understand people who were different from them, stop gossip in their schools, resolve fights peacefully, and recognize the consequences of their actions. Such positive findings underscore the importance that athletes can have on young people in their communities.

With thousands of college student athletes and hundreds of coaches here in Massachusetts, we have the capacity to train every student in the Commonwealth about how to disrupt and confront bullying.

Although it is important to focus on schools and the internet to address bullying, we must look at other venues to tackle this issue as well. And sport and physical activity is another great way to solve this problem.

Again I would like to thank you the State Legislature and the Attorney General's Office for holding these hearings and listening to our testimony today.